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Fieldwork Study of the Palenquero community and their Interactions with Social Media Platforms

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PALENQUERO AND SOCIAL MEDIA

By

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## ABSTRACT

This fieldwork study examines the use of social media among residents of San Basilio de Palenque (Colombia), 65 of which were interviewed onsite for this project. San Basilio is a bilingual community that speaks Spanish and “Lengua”, a Spanish creole with strong African roots which the academic community refers to the language as “Palenquero”. San Basilio is recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage location and for its language and culture.

Due to in-group and out-group negative perceptions towards Lengua, the number of Palenquero speakers has gradually dwindled. In recent years the perception of being a Lengua speaker has changed from negative to positive due to local activists as well as researchers interested in preserving the language. The data from this project reveals that there is a high use of social media platforms from younger members of the community. There is also a positive trend of using social media as a revitalization tool among leaders in the community.

Although Palenquero has been extensively researched by Lipski ( 2005, 2015a, 2016), Armin (1996, 1998), and Maglia (2015), the goal of this project differs in that it aims to understand how a historically marginalized language and community is interacting with advancements in technology.

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## INTRODUCTION

The capacity to interact with a global network has developed through the creation of networking sites, especially social media sites (SMS), creating a new plane of existence, the online world. As internet access continues to reach new corners of the globe, more individuals, communities, and organizations are portraying their identity online. Much of the same social phenomena that occur in person are replicated in online communities (Gershon, 2010). Users create networks based on the relationships they have in real life and continue to grow their social network online. The opportunities to expand their social network is limitless due to the globalization and continuous growth of social media. Social media continues to spread globally, reaching new populations every year as demonstrated by Tobler's first law of geography (Kamath, Caverlee, Cheng, & Sui, 2012). For small rural communities in the outskirts of large cities, internet access arrived at a slower pace. Located an hour's drive from the city of Cartagena, Colombia, San Basilio de Palenque (Palenque) is one such community. Home to bilingual speakers of Spanish and a Spanish creole known as Palenquero (Schwegler, 1998), its residents identify themselves as the first free town of the Americas (Arrázola, 1970). Due to its unique culture and history, many researchers have extensively examined San Basilio de Palenque's origin, people, and language (Armin, 1996, 1998; Friedemann, 1993; Lipski, 2005, 2015, 2016; Moñino & Schwegler, 2013; Maglia, 2015).

However, not much is known about the interaction between residents of San Basilio and online social platforms. In order to fill this gap in knowledge, this report investigates the interactions between residents of San Basilio de Palenque and online social media platforms using a mixed-methods approach. Due to the quick development of affordable internet access globally, San Basilio de Palenque is quickly entering the online networking community. Much

like the interactions Palenqueros had in the 1980s with news media (Friedemann, 1993) the introduction of SMS is a developing situation. This research aims at continuing the conversation regarding the usage of SMS in Palenque. The aim of this research is to garner a better understanding of the interactions between the bilingual residents of San Basilio and social media sites.

### A Brief History of Palenque

San Basilio de Palenque is a small rural town on the outskirts of Cartagena, Colombia. Home to 4,000 - 5,000 residents many of whom are bilingual speakers of Palenquero and Spanish (Schwegler & Green, 2007). The exact date of its founding is unknown, but recent studies approximate its founding to be between 1655 and 1674 (Navarette, 2008). Its history dates back to the 1600s when enslaved Africans fought against the slave trade in Africa (Friedemann & Patiño Rosselli, 1983). The captured African people brought to the Americas continued to revolt, escaping to the mountains and creating maroon communities. Maroon communities are defined as communities created by people who rebelled against enslavement and created new societies in the wildernesses of America (Price, 1996). These maroon communities, also known as palenques, continued to fight against slave traders in Colombia to free captured Africans. The Palenque of San Basilio led by Benkos Bioho was so successful in fighting against the Spanish militia, that in 1691 the Spanish crown granted the Palenqueros of San Basilio their freedom (Friedemann & Patiño Rosselli, 1983).

Many of San Basilio's cultural traditions have remained constant throughout the years due to its isolation from the rest of Colombian society (Schwegler, 2011a). Although this isolation provided Palenqueros with undisturbed practices of their traditions, residents who ventured outside of San Basilio encountered negative perceptions towards their language

(Schwegler, 2011b). The formation of negative views towards the Palenquero language can be seen in the historical interactions between Palenqueros and the outside world. Many individuals unfamiliar with Palenqueros would hear their language and categorize it as “poorly spoken (black) Spanish” (Schwegler, 2011b). As a result of these interactions future generations were taught to avoid speaking their language (Lipski, 2020). The effects of this stigmatization can be seen in the diminishing amount of fluent native Palenquero speakers leading to a categorization of Palenquero as an endangered language (Morton, 2005).

In 1980, San Basilio de Palenque came into the international spotlight for being the home of the world boxing champion Antonio Cervantes, also known as Kid Pambelé (Richard, 1977). During their interactions with the outside world, negative perceptions towards Palenquero's language would increase. News media and researchers would become interested in the village of San Basilio. The recognition of Kid Pambelé's hometown would bring changes to the town. As a token of gratitude, the son of Colombia's President at the time "gifted" San Basilio de Palenque electricity (Riding, 1987; Lipski, 2012). The pride residents of San Basilio felt was shared nationwide, attracting domestic tourists and archeologists to visit the rural town.

The pride in their boxer was also replicated into pride for their culture and language. In 2005, San Basilio de Palenque was recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” cementing its importance in the community itself, the country of Colombia, and the history of humanity. At the center of San Basilio de Palenque resides a plaque proclaiming “Palenque, primer territorio negro libre de America”, which roughly translates to “Palenque, the first free black territory of America”. After years of being considered an endangered language, the interest in the Palenquero language and culture was revived. Community leaders and outside



researchers focused on a revitalization of Palenquero (Lipski, 2012, 2020; Schwegler, 2011a, 2011b).

### Field Research

In order to effectively collect data regarding the use and interactions between residents of San Basilio de Palenque and online social platforms, it was important to immerse myself in the area. Part of fieldwork is to collect data in its original environment (Bowern, 2015). To effectively create rapport with the community members, living in the community for two weeks allowed for the collection of organic conversational survey responses. Thanks to a grant from the National Science Foundation during two weeks in June of 2019, research was gathered with aid of a graduate student researcher and our field advisor, Dr. John Lipski to conduct field research. Thanks to the logistical guidance of Bernardino Pérez Miranda, a community leader, I was able to recruit participants for one on one interviews.

### Mixed-Method Approach (Convergent M-MA)

For this mixed-method research, a convergent parallel design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) was implemented due to the time constraints imposed by the funding for field research. Limited to a 3-week stay in the village of San Basilio, the acquisition of data was centered on this constraint. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously through on-field interviews. The structure of the interviews constituted three sections. Beginning with a short biographical section, moving into the quantitative questions regarding interactions with social media and ending with open-ended questions focusing on the general attitudes towards social media usage.

### Procedure

To effectively make use of the two-week period residing in San Basilio de Palenque the procedure for collecting and organizing data was broken into three main phases. The first phase was conducted during May of 2019, a three-day workshop was held in order to create survey questions that could be conducted during the one on one interviews. With the guidance of Dr. Covadonga Lamar Prieto and graduate research assistant Miriam Villazón Valbuena, the survey was created on Qualtrics, a survey software.

The second phase consisted of traveling to San Basilio de Palenque and residing in a home in town provided by our community guide, Bernardino Pérez Miranda. Considering the poor reliability of internet access for visitors in San Basilio de Palenque, the survey was downloaded into a PDF file and uploaded onto two laptops and a portable memory drive. Once we arrived in the field, participants were recorded using ZOOM H4n PRO Handy Recorders to ensure survey answer transcriptions would be accurate (Bower, 2015). The interviews were conducted on-site in the backyard of the residential home of the community leader. The space provided privacy and served as a familiar space to all participants. The proximity of the interview location allowed participants to arrive and leave quickly. In consideration of participant's time, interviews were conducted early in the morning and late in the evening, which accounted for the time necessary for participants to go about their day uninterrupted by the interview. Participants volunteered for interviews and were paid accordingly.

Finally, the recordings were transcribed and inputted into Airtable, a database service tool. The social networks of Palenqueros residing in San Basilio are close-knit (Friedemann, 2002). Following the principle of confidentiality encouraged participants to express their opinions and beliefs towards the ideological questions without worry (Fitzgerald & Hamilton, 1996). The privacy of the interview location promoted interviewees to voice their opinions. This

factor is essential in the collection of data since various survey questions asked about their opinions. In order to improve confidentiality participants were codified before being inputted into Airtable. Each participant received a unique code for researchers to identify individuals and for data to be correctly inputted. Confidentiality was important for this survey since participants were asked to voice their opinions on the usage of language on SMS.

### Participants

For this project, sixty-four participants (N=64) were interviewed in the town of San Basilio de Palenque. For the confidentiality of the individuals who participated in this project, a unique code is used to identify each participant. Participants were selected according to preselected criteria to have a population sample that could speak on the usage of Palenquero online. Participants were all born inside or around San Basilio de Palenque, had a proficient level of understanding in the Palenquero language, and resided within the town. Participants range from eighteen years to sixty-five years of age.

	<b>18-25 yrs old</b>	<b>26-35 yrs old</b>	<b>36-45 yrs old</b>	<b>≥ 46yrs old</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Male</b>	13	6	10	4	33
<b>Female</b>	16	9	5	1	31

Table 1: Participant Demographics

### Current Data Results and Discussion

This first survey section aimed at gathering biographical information on participants. A variety of research has been conducted on SMS users that focus on factors such as race, parental

education, residence location, gender, and preferences (Tufekci, 2008; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Ljepava, Orr, Locke, & Ross, 2013). For these survey questions factors including age, income, and jobs are crucial in understanding the frequency and availability residents of San Basilio have to SMS.

The second section aimed at understanding the usage of SMS. Qualitative and quantitative questions were asked simultaneously so participants could explain their usage of SMS. Participants were asked the number of hours they spent on SMS, which SMS they frequented, what language they used online, and what attitudes they felt towards usage of Palenquero and Spanish on SMS. Specific social media sites were selected as survey responses to diversify the type of online platforms. Social media consists of various types of sites such as social networking sites (SNS), microblogs, and social news sites (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). The social media sites selected are Facebook (SNS), Twitter (microblog), Instagram (SNS), Snapchat (microblog), WhatsApp (SNS), Facebook Messenger (SNS), and Pinterest (microblog). At this time, the data processed only includes the most used SMS in this survey, Facebook, and WhatsApp.

The results show that 56 out of 64 (87.5%) participants used some sort of SMS. The most popular SMS among the participants is Facebook with 55 out of 56 (.98%) of SMS users indicating that they had and operated an account. The second most popular is WhatsApp with 36 out of 64 (56%) participants using it. Various participants mentioned the need to purchase data packages in order to access the internet and similarly their SMS. A phrase often heard when asked about their SMS access was “Cuando tengo datos”/ “When I have data”. This indicates that access to the internet becomes a vital factor that influences the use of SMS sites.

The frequency of use was collected by asking the participants how long they used each SMS they mentioned. Results demonstrated that Facebook and WhatsApp were the most frequented SMS with 38 participants using Facebook and 24 participants using WhatsApp for over an hour daily.

	< 1 hour	≥ 1 hour but < 2 hours	≥ 2 hours
<b>Facebook</b>	17	14	24
<b>WhatsApp</b>	12	8	16

Table 2: Participant SMS usage

The reason Facebook and WhatsApp have become the favorite for many of the residents of San Basilio de Palenque is due to the revitalization efforts by community leaders. One of the techniques to practice the Palenquero language is to use it on SMS. Participants from all age groups mentioned the effectiveness of this practice. Younger participants mentioned the use of Facebook and WhatsApp to designate a group chats with the sole purpose of communicating in Palenquero to improve their usage.

(1.)“a mí me parece muy bien esta dinámica que están tomando porque eso hace revitalizar la lengua palenquera y concientizar más a los jóvenes...Porque ya los jóvenes no la quieren hablar algunos por pena. Pero yo si la hablo, a mí no me da pena hablar la lengua palenquera.”

Translation: “I think this dynamic you are taking is very good because it helps revitalize the Palenquero language and encourage the youth...because some of the youth don't want to speak

[Palenquero] due to embarrassment. But I speak it, I'm not embarrassed to speak the Palenquero language" - (PA-04-07-E-D)

When asked what language participants used online, 38 Facebook users and 21 WhatsApp users responded that they used Spanish and Lengua. However, when asked what language users most frequently saw on Facebook and WhatsApp all but 2 said they most frequently saw Spanish in their feeds. SMS users are globally connected and platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp are filled with user-generated content (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). This disproportion in Palenquero user content demonstrates that there are still communities being left out of social media (Girish, Williams, & Yates, 2014). However, as internet access becomes prevalent in San Basilio de Palenque this historically marginalized community is beginning to generate their own content and presence online. Participant (PA-02-04-A-D) illustrates this point when answering what language they use on their SMS;

(2.) “ Utilizó el español para hacer posts y cosas así, y la lengua cuando ocurre un evento importante en San Basilio de Palenque quiero manifestarlo ante el mundo”

Translation:” I use Spanish to make posts and things like that, and lengua when there is an important event in San Basilio de Palenque and I want to manifest it to the world”

In addition to making San Basilio de Palenque posts, they make their presence known through their music profiles on Spotify. There are many artists in San Basilio de Palenque that use SMS to create online presences. Kombilesa Mi, an afro-Colombian hip hop group originating from San Basilio de Palenque, makes their culture and identity known on various online platforms. In addition to artists, small companies like Kutú, a clothing brand based in San Basilio, use Facebook to promote their brand.

One principle factor that affects the usage of social media amongst residents of San Basilio is the accessibility to internet connection. Due to the location of San Basilio internet connectivity has not been great. However there continues to be development on that front as internet providers in Colombia improve their capacity. A prevalent feature of the current public connectivity available to Palenqueros is the presence of two small internet cafes. Situated closer to the edge of the town, these two internet cafes provide access to modest desktops and internet. From my field observations at these cafes, the internet speeds were slow. Although the speed is slow, it allows residents to surf the web, for a set price. One participant commented on the popular activities, (3.) “Se usa Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat y Facebook Messenger pero no se que es YouTube o Spotify.” This translates to, “We use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat y Facebook Messenger but I don’t know what YouTube or Spotify is”. Although this comment was made by a single participant the usage of social platforms was common among other participants (see Table 2).

Another means of internet connection is using smartphones. Although mobile phones are found abundantly, the internet accessibility of these phones varies. As one participant described it, (4.) “dependiendo en los minutos que tenga” which translates to “depends on the minutes I have”. Not all Palenqueros have a cell service plan with unlimited data. Some must purchase a set amount of data which they call “minutos” because it allows for a specific amount of time online. This causes there to be disparities in the amount of time available to social media users. Those with unlimited data can use and browse their online social platforms without worrying about time. Users with limited minutos must be conscious of the time they spend on each online platform. It is important to note that due to WhatsApp’s SMS style of usage, there is a preference for Palenqueros to use WhatsApp as the main source of social media. WhatsApp’s interface

allows them to immediately check and send messages as compared to Facebook's interface where users are presented with the timeline first rather than messages. This difference in interface usage is important when the amount of time online is limited. Historically the community of San Basilio has primarily been an agricultural economy (Friedemann & Patiño, 1983) which limits the amount of income for the residents of San Basilio. The influx of tourism and research from Colombian and international tourists has created a new source of income. In the last ten years there has been an increase of cell phones even amongst agricultural workers as stated by one participant; (5.) "Uso Facebook unos minutos porque el resto del tiempo estoy en los campo." This translates to "I use Facebook for a few minutes because the rest of the time im in the fields" this means that some agricultural workers also have cells phones. However, for those Palenqueros who do have unlimited plans the use of social media is high. When asked how often they use Facebook one participant who had an unlimited service plan said:

(6.) "uff, una gran parte [del día] ... literalmente el día complete. Hasta cuando me levanto antes de agarrar las chancletas agarro el teléfono." Translation: "uff, a large part [of the day], literally the whole day. Even when I just wake up before putting on my sandals y grab my cellphone."

This quote (6.) compared to the following quote (7.) show the difference in usage among residents of San Basilio. The access to constant internet and the opportunity to log onto and use these platforms is different for each Palenquero user.

Social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular because of the facilitation between family members and friends. When asked about the use of Facebook many participants replied with a similar answer to this one:



(7.) “A Facebook le didico muy poco tiempo. Creo que alrededor de por dia un par de horas. Dos o tres horitas. Que Facebook como tal, pero Messenger para comunicarme para chatear con amigos y amigas...el uso es intermitente. En este momento deben estar escribiendome, y entonces en cierto momento reviso y respond...”

This quote (7.) provides a glimpse to the reason and strategies used by Palenqueros to interact with social media platforms. In this case Facebook’s timeline was not frequented as often as the Messenger option. Facebook’s Messenger acts like an SMS, like WhatsApp, which allows the users to chat. The primary usage of social media platforms is as communication between family and friends who are not in Palenque. Many Palenqueros have moved into locations outside of San Basilio de Palenque like Baranquilla or Cartagena (Friedemann, 2002). To stay in contact with their family and continue traditions and language the use of online platforms is essential.

The practice of Palenquero language through online platforms is prevalent in the interactions Palenquero’s have online. Due to the decrease in fluency of Palenquero or Lengua (Lipski, 2012) among new generations the use of social media platforms to practice the language is a common theme among users. When asked if they should use Palenquero online, participants agreed with this statement. One participant summarized the majority feeling in this way:

(8.) “Yo creo, que si es importante, es necesario hacerlo. Sobre todo, entre los Palenqueros y las Palenqueras porque la lengua es una de las manifestaciones que contituyen el patrimonio intangible Palenquero. Y de hecho es la lengua propia nuestra que se encuentra hoy muy debilitada.”

Translation: “I think that it is important, even necessary to do. Especially, between the Palenqueros and Palenqueras because our language is one of the manifestations that makes up the intangible heritage of Palenque. And its actually our very own language that is currently found in a debilitated state.”

This powerful quote encapsulates the feelings of a majority of participants regarding the use of Palenquero online. To practice the language between each other, Palenqueros use Facebook and WhatsApp as educational tools. There are Facebook pages dedicated to the promotion of cultural events which are sometimes written using Palenquero. As previously mentioned, I was also told by multiple participants that there are WhatsApp groups consisting of younger Palenqueros that dedicate their time to practicing using lengua. Due to the privacy of these group chats observing the actual chats was not part of this project. However, the anecdotes told to use by some of the younger participants of this project recall having older Palenqueros in these chats that serve as guides in using the language. Aside from these formal groups there are also private groups that aim to practice Palenquero independently. One participant mentioned, (9.) “...pero hay chats se puede decir. Es Bueno, si. Tenemos un grupo de amigas y aveces hablamos en lengua Palenquera.” This quote shows that the practice of using lengua palenquera happens outside of educational settings.

Not all Palenqueros agree with the use of Lengua Palenuqera online. There are participants who disagreed with the usage of palenquero online because it would not make sense to those outside the community of Palenque. However, the presence of Palenqueros online has another purpose as described by this participant’s quote:

(10.) “Hablando de las redes sociales, deberian ser medios para tambien difundir estos conocimientos parte de la cultura [Palenquera] como es la lengua palenquera. Y pues que deben ...ser un vinculo para que nuestra cultura sea conocida a nivel mundial, a nivel global.”

Translation: “Speaking of social media sites, these should be means of also spreading the knowledge of the culture of Palenque like the Palenquero language. And well, they should be means of getting our culture to be known worldwide, at a global scale.”

This perspective demonstrates the possibilities social media has for Palenque. There have been many ways San Basilio de Palenque has been placed on the global spotlight; Kid Pambelé (Richard, 1977), UNESCO, and Kombilesami all of which placed San Basilio on a national and international stage. With the advent and progress of social media the opportunity for Palenqueros to make their presence known to a global audience is increased. The traditions still practiced in San Basilio, like drum making and the African influence gastronomy along with a plethora of traditions and the spread of social media accessibility, the participants hope will be fulfilled.

#### Limitations and Future Work

A primary limitation to this study is that the data collected was entirely within two weeks and thus the number of participants able to take part in this study was limited to 64; however, it is estimated that Palenque is home to more than 3500 (Lipski, 2012). To gather a more realistic understanding of the actual interaction between residents of San Basilio and SMS, further survey inquiry is required. An ideal sample size would consist of a random sampling of residents who have internet access and use some SMS.

The study sample was selected based on the ability to speak Palenque so they could speak on behalf of using Palenquero online. However, revitalization is ongoing, and the development

of fluent speakers is a community-wide effort (Lipksi, 2012). The number of proficient Palenquero speakers will continue to grow and with the advancement of affordable technology, the number of SMS users will increase. Future work would continue the collection of SMS usage in Palenque. With enough time the grammar standardization of online Palenquero could occur from the use of Facebook and WhatsApp (Lenihan, 2011).

The next steps in this research are to analyze the other SMS, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook Messenger, and Snapchat. Additionally, finding if there are correlations between user's attitudes and the frequency of usage for each SMS. Considering the trends seen in this data collection regarding the difference in use, the next step would be finding out if there is a connection between the type of labor that is done by a participant and the amount of hours dedicated to social media platforms. There could be some clear connection between labor, internet access and social media presence. This would influence the type of Palenquero language that is being practiced or publicized. The words used in agricultural work could not be practiced online thus limiting the vocabulary of online users compared to other speakers of Palenquero.

Palenquero is once more encountering Spanish speakers from around the world. With approximately 425 million Spanish speakers worldwide (Díaz-Campos, 2011) and over 2.7 billion Facebook and 2 billion WhatsApp users (Settanni, Marengo, Fabris & Longobardi, 2018) the limitless networks between Palenqueros and Spanish speakers presents a new field of possibilities. The interconnected digital world brings many questions and possibilities to the Palenquero's future. How will Palenquero's identity be portrayed online? Will there be negative perceptions of the Palenquero language online? How will Palenqueros use the social media platforms to spread knowledge of Palenquero culture and traditions? These are a few of the possible questions that could be researched.

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